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#### How to cite:

Wilks, Linda (2016). The lived experience of London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic volunteers: a serious leisure perspective. *Leisure Studies*, 35(5) pp. 652–667.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

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Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1080/02614367.2014.993334>

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# **The lived experience of London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic volunteers: a serious leisure perspective**

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Published online by Leisure Studies earlycite December 2014

Open access copy available via this link:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/7gNirHN3crAu77PP6Up6/full>

## **Abstract**

Along with other sporting mega-events, the Olympic Games, in all its versions, makes extensive use of volunteers. The 70,000 London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic volunteers, for example, played a vital role in the delivery of the event. Stebbins' theoretical perspective of serious leisure includes consideration of volunteering and there are calls for its further empirical evaluation. This study therefore uses a qualitative study of the lived experience of London 2012 volunteers to test the relevance of the serious leisure framework to Olympic volunteering. The data are drawn from the reflective diaries of 20 participants who volunteered in a variety of roles during London 2012. It is concluded that all of the qualities of serious leisure are identifiable to various extents within the experiences of the London 2012 volunteers. This finding will help Olympic and other sporting mega-event managers to understand and improve the experiences of their volunteers. Recommendations are also made, in the light of the findings, for the further refinement of the serious leisure perspective. Particular attention is paid to highlighting how the findings might contribute to recent debates around whether sporting mega-event volunteering is best explained by the serious leisure quality of career volunteering, or by the serious leisure associated concept of project-based leisure, or alternatively by the competing term of episodic volunteering.

Key words: volunteerism; sport; mega-events; diaries; serious leisure

# **The lived experience of London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic volunteers: a serious leisure perspective**

## **Introduction**

Interest is growing in the volunteers who help to create mega-events for several reasons. The use of volunteers to staff these events is becoming a useful answer to the acknowledged challenge of the short-term and ‘pulsating’ nature of mega-events and special events (Hanlon & Cuskelly, 2002). Political interest in mega-event volunteering highlights the potential legacies of volunteers being inspired to continue to use newly formed skills and expertise to benefit their local communities post-event (Department for Culture Media and Sport, 2012). The pros, such as the potential to harness enthusiasm and creativity; and cons, such as the need to train volunteers or their lack of reliability, of using volunteers to staff mega-events have also attracted attention (Tum et al., 2006).

Volunteers have played a vital role in the staging of Olympic Games since 1948, with recently the Beijing Olympics making use of 100,000 volunteers, the Sochi Winter Olympics using 25,000, and the Singapore Youth Olympics needing 20,000 volunteers. The London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games was no exception, recruiting over 70,000 volunteers, or ‘Games Makers’ as they were known as, to fill a wide variety of roles across all the venues and beyond (International Olympic Committee, 2012). Enhancing understanding of Olympic volunteering is key to ensuring that the recruitment, training and deployment of these volunteers contributes to the staging of a successful event.

Rochester (2013) highlights three perspectives on the phenomenon of volunteering, which could be of use when studying event volunteering. The dominant paradigm, of volunteering as unpaid work or service; and the second paradigm, volunteering as activism are both well covered in the literature (Cordery et al., 2011; Jones, 2002). However, Rochester asserts that a third perspective, that of volunteering as a form of leisure has so far been largely neglected

by scholars. Rochester particularly draws on Stebbins' (1996: 211-2) view that 'volunteering is invariably or frequently a form of leisure' and that 'many volunteer roles, because they offer their incumbents special careers and distinctive sets of rewards, can be understood as serious leisure'. There is potential, therefore, for serious leisure to be examined within the context of event volunteering.

### **Theoretical framework**

Serious leisure was first launched by Stebbins (1982) in his seminal paper which applies the perspective to three types of leisure: amateurism, hobbyist pursuits and volunteering. Further papers emphasise the volunteering strand of serious leisure (Stebbins, 1996, 2012) or attempt to further develop the theory (Stebbins, 2005). Three main forms of leisure: serious, casual and project-based, each featuring volunteering, are now synthesised within the perspective. The serious leisure form includes six qualities: perseverance; the tendency for volunteers to have enduring careers in their chosen volunteering endeavours; the use of knowledge, training and skills; durable benefits: divided into self-interested benefits and altruism; belonging to a social world with a unique ethos of beliefs, values and norms; and a pride-based identification with the chosen pursuit (Stebbins, 1982). Casual leisure, first identified as a contrast to the serious leisure form, emphasises play, relaxation and passivity (Stebbins, 1982); while project-based leisure, a later addition, emphasises one-off projects, including a mention of volunteering at festivals and sport events (Stebbins, 2005).

The serious leisure perspective appears to have been well received, being cited in the volunteer press (Hustinx, 2010), as well as being highlighted in the leisure (Lockstone-Binney et al., 2010) and event management literatures (Baum & Lockstone, 2007). It is still subject to calls for testing and refining, however, including from Stebbins (2005) himself.

## **The research problem**

Within the context of Olympic volunteering, two aspects of the serious leisure perspective stand out as warranting particular investigation. First, there appears to be confusion as to where the project-based leisure form fits within the overarching serious leisure perspective. Stebbins (2007: 43) suggests that it is possible to draw on the serious leisure framework to develop the concept due to project-based volunteering being ‘moderately complicated’ and a ‘creative undertaking’ requiring ‘considerable planning’. However, Stebbins also claims that project-based leisure is not serious leisure due to its episodic nature: that is its ‘short-term’, ‘one-shot or occasional’ nature (Stebbins, 2005: 2). Episodic volunteering, a term first highlighted by Macduff (1991), where volunteers choose to use their leisure time to contribute to short-term, often one-off projects, is a rapidly expanding volunteering phenomenon according to Rochester *et al.* (2012) and appears to show similar characteristics to project-based leisure. Episodic volunteering is particularly characteristic of sport events and festivals according to Handy *et al.* (2006) so could possibly be applicable to Olympic and other sporting mega-event volunteering.

The second aspect of the serious leisure perspective which deserves attention within the concept of Olympic volunteering is the career volunteering quality of serious leisure. Criticism has been made of Stebbins’ use of the term ‘career’, implying regular, long-lasting involvement in a volunteering activity, within his serious leisure framework (Parker, 1992). Stebbins (2007) responded by likening the career volunteering quality of serious leisure to Goffman’s (1961: 127) ‘moral career’, a perspective which emphasises self-identity and status affirmation. As there is the possibility of self-identity and status being affirmed during volunteering at a high profile mega-event such as the Olympics, this could signal mega-event volunteering being a form of career volunteering, rather than being project-based or episodic.

Also linked to career in serious leisure, Stebbins (2007) highlights a need for knowledge, training, experience and skill, all of which may be needed in Olympic volunteering.

Analysis of this London 2012 data may help to contribute to the further academic development of the serious leisure perspective. The inter-twined concepts of career volunteering, knowledge and skills, and project-based leisure; as well as consideration of episodic volunteering, appear to be deserving of particular attention.

### **Literature review**

Recent research on Olympic volunteering has focused on motivation (Bang et al., 2009; Fairley, 2007), social inclusion (Minnaert, 2012), volunteer recruitment (Chanavat & Ferrand, 2010; Zhuang & Girginov, 2012) and volunteers' values (Long & Goldenberg, 2010). Research on the volunteer experience is sparse, however. Also, although Stebbins (2005) suggested the possibility of labelling volunteering at the 1988 Calgary Winter Olympics as project-based volunteering, no examples of the empirical use of a serious leisure perspective to frame Olympic volunteering have been discovered within the published academic literature.

There have been indications that around 5,000 London 2012 volunteers have volunteered at the Glasgow Commonwealth Games in 2014, and are likely to go on to volunteer for the Rio 2016 Olympics (Oliver, 2014), thus hinting at career volunteering. Also relevant to serious leisure due to their emphasis on learning and training are studies by Elstad (1996) of learning and satisfaction at the Lillehammer Winter Olympics; and by Benson *et al.* (2013) of the training of Vancouver Winter Olympics volunteers.

Insights may be gained from studies which link the serious leisure perspective to volunteering within the context of other sporting mega-events (Baum & Lockstone, 2007). Harrington *et al.* (2000) conclude that the volunteers at the 1999 Queensland 500 motorsports event should be characterised as career volunteers due to their specialised skills and sustained involvement

in motorsport volunteering. Looking at volunteers at the 2001 Francophone Games, held in Ottawa, Canada, Gravelle and Larocque (2005) confirm a relationship between event volunteering and serious leisure, with various levels of importance found for the different qualities of serious leisure within this context. The authors found that over 90% of the volunteers at this sporting mega-event were keen to maintain their involvement, thus hinting at a sustained career volunteering orientation. However, Gravelle and Laroque also found that the achievement of career-type professional goals was not of high importance to the participants.

Other sport event studies of the likely future engagement of volunteers, although not explicitly testing the serious leisure perspective, may be linked to an investigation of career volunteering in sporting mega-events. Neufeind *et al.* (2013), for example, found that volunteers at the European Football Championship 2008 were likely to be retained for future event volunteering, although not necessarily for general volunteering. Similarly, MacLean and Hamm (2007) found that 97.5% of the volunteers at a major Canadian golf tournament intended to continue as golf volunteers, while 76.4% would volunteer at other sport events. Downward and Ralston (2006) also suggest that volunteering at a particular event may lead to regular volunteering which could be construed as a career volunteering profile.

Jarvis and Blank (2011) assume that volunteering at the 2007 World Artistic Gymnastics Championships in Stuttgart, Germany should be identified within Stebbins' framework as project-based volunteering. However, they also state that a large majority of their respondents could be considered career volunteers as they had previously volunteered at international events: this therefore puts their participants within the serious leisure, rather than the project-based leisure strand.

The sporting mega-event studies which have used a serious leisure perspective demonstrate that it shows potential for exploring Olympic volunteering, with the aspects of career

volunteering and project-based leisure being particularly highlighted as contested terms worthy of further exploration. This study which investigates how far London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic volunteering may be described using the serious leisure framework, focusing particularly on career volunteering and project-based leisure, will help to fill a gap and make a contribution to the academic field of Olympic volunteering research, potentially helping to further refine the serious leisure perspective.

## **Methodology**

The study of volunteering at the Vancouver Winter Olympics by Kodama *et al.* (2012) suggests that setting thick description within theoretical frameworks can enhance theory as well as providing understanding of how people are affected by management processes. They recommend examining the lived experience of Olympic volunteers, from the perspective of the volunteers themselves, as a suitable approach to Olympic volunteering research. Green and Chalip (2004) also suggest that there would be value in research which examines the volunteers' lived experience of volunteering in order to develop a fuller understanding of the leisure-based dimensions of volunteering.

As the aim of the study was to explore how far the lived experience of the London 2012 volunteers could be described as serious leisure, the gathering of rich qualitative data which would get beneath the surface of the volunteers' experiences, were identified as most appropriate. Bolger *et al.* (2003) suggest that diary methods are a useful instrument by which to repeatedly examine ongoing experiences. The diaries may highlight social, psychological and physiological processes within the context in which they unfold. The minimisation of the time between the reported event or experience and the account of the experience can reduce the likelihood of retrospection colouring the participant's account, according to Bolger *et al.* Diary data is therefore likely to be as much 'in-the-lived-moment' as possible and is likely to provide rich data which gets beneath the surface of the volunteers' experiences. The



sequencing of events is also more likely to be accurately captured using a diary method, rather than by the use of interviews or questionnaires (Latham, 2014). Bell (1999) warns that diary completion is not usually a suitable research tool for people with limited educational background. As the London 2012 volunteers had already been screened for their volunteering roles via online application forms and interview, it was judged that their educational level was likely to be sufficient for the use of this method, however.

Tsang (2013) argues that a case study approach is likely to have merit over quantitative methods as a means of theoretical generalization and falsification, providing other research validity criteria are met. A qualitative approach is therefore likely to be suitable to address the other aim of this study: to refine the serious leisure perspective in the light of the findings. Tsang also cites Buckley and Chapman's (1997) study, suggesting that letting the data tell their own stories, with little intervention from the researchers, is a particularly useful approach for uncovering the 'black swans' (Flyvbjerg, 2006:228) which may lead to the questioning of existing theory.

To encourage the London 2012 participants of this study to fully probe and reflect on their own thoughts and feelings, a diary entry framework based on Gibbs' (1988) reflective cycle was provided. The framework asks diarists to describe incidents, explore their feelings about the incident, evaluate what was good and bad about that experience, analyse how it related to their volunteering experience, and speculate on its future implications. As O'Connell and Dymont (2013) suggest, keeping a reflexive journal encourages the grounding of writing in the lived experience, as well as encouraging critical reflection. The study adhered to institutional ethical guidelines on research methodologies and full approval was granted. Specific direction on when to complete a diary entry was not given to the participants: the researcher stressed that there was no need to complete an entry every day. Rather, the guidance on the diary entry template stated: 'Please write something whenever you have

thoughts and feelings about volunteering as a Gamesmaker: as you go through the lead-up to the Olympic and Paralympic Games, during the Games, and afterwards, for as long as you are thinking about the experience'. This acknowledges that event volunteering may be phased, with antecedents and consequences surrounding the experience of the actual event, as Omoto and Snyder (2002) suggest.

To recruit the participants, volunteers were approached up to two months before the Games began, using various convenience methods. These methods included social media, through friends and colleagues, and by personal contact at training events. Effort was made to ensure that a wide spread of ages, place of residence and type of role was represented within the participant set. All diarists also completed a form at the recruitment stage, supplying basic demographic information, as well as responding to a question about their previous volunteering experience. The participants were encouraged to start recording their reflections up to a month before the Games took place, as well as during the Games and for up to a month afterwards. The final count of diaries received was 20, out of the 28 who initially agreed to participate, with the number of diary entries from each participant varying from five to 60. The participants varied in age from twenty to over seventy and were mostly resident in locations across the UK. In addition, one respondent travelled over from mainland Europe and another's home was in the Middle East, although she was a London-based student at the time of the Games. Four of the diarists were on duty at the Paralympics; the rest at the Olympics. The participants were on duty across a total of eight venues or locations, with roles including event services (ticket collection and giving directions), medical first responder, driver, road race marshal, printed results distributor, reporter, football referee liaison, and physiotherapist.

The participants had all written in-depth critiques of their experiences and had probed their own feelings, although not all participants presented their entries using the reflective

framework suggested. The diary entries were next loaded into NVivo for the coding of the content against the six qualities of serious leisure.

### **Framing the data with the qualities of serious leisure**

The diary entries and background information forms of the twenty participants will next be explored within the framework of Stebbins' qualities of serious leisure. Segments, lines or incidents within the diaries are coded to the concepts within the serious leisure framework.

#### ***Perseverance***

The theme of perseverance: that is, the serious leisure quality of continuing with the activity despite anxiety, fatigue or challenging physical environments, was one of the strongest to emerge from the data. All of the participants mentioned issues relating to the challenges of sticking with the volunteering and conquering adversity at the Games.

The London 2012 organisers started recruiting the volunteers in September 2010, around two years before the Olympics opening ceremony. Volunteers recorded details of time and money spent during this pre-Games period, on application forms, interviews, training sessions, uniform fittings, online 'revision', reading emails and negotiating shift pattern offers. During the Games period itself, there was mention from the participants of the travel and accommodation costs incurred; of the long shifts, early starts and late finishes; of feeling bored and under-used at times; and of feeling nervous and anxious beforehand.

P7: The financial cost of being a volunteer was much higher than I would have thought. My best guess is around £1,200, which I guess is my donation to the IOC. Many of the volunteers wrote of feelings of anxiety before the Games or before the training sessions, such as being apprehensive about learning the ropes, as well as nervous about doing everything correctly, although these were usually dissipated soon after arrival. There were

also entries about the determination to persevere, including P12's comment on the physical challenges.

P12: I was very tempted to not go in today as my body feels so wrecked. I looked at the day off notification book yesterday for a couple of minutes trying to decide whether to put myself in or not. I didn't want to lie though. Then I thought I'd see how the day went first. It wasn't too bad so didn't sign out at the end either.

Other volunteers wrote of the slow process of uniform collection, while another writes of being shouted at by spectators when on duty, although also about staying positive for the next day.

P3: I received the brunt of people's emotions and anger and was consistently complained to and shouted at for the entirety of my shift. I felt lost, stressed and a bit angry. I feel a little wary about what tomorrow will bring but I am also looking on the positive side as nothing could be much worse than it was today.

Having to get up early or getting home late for long shifts was mentioned by several participants too, with its negative effects on socialising, and its demanding physical challenges.

Although all of the participants except one, who dropped out four weeks into her five week stint, persevered until the end of their allocated volunteering period, two participants also mentioned taking some 'unofficial' time off.

P11: After a long day of doing very little I came to realise that I don't wanna do this anymore. I am giving up my time to do nothing and it's making me miserable. So I have decided to cancel some shifts and go home a week earlier than planned.

The data show that, although there was a certain amount of dropping out before the volunteering period started, once the volunteers had started their volunteering period, it appeared that they usually persevered to the end, despite challenges which varied from

overwork to underwork, and from physical challenges to the psychological challenges of being verbally abused.

### *Career volunteering*

The second serious leisure quality is the tendency for volunteers to have ‘careers’ in their pursuit; that is they continue with their volunteering activities through time, possibly transferring to other organisations, accumulating rewards and prestige (or retrogression) as in a paid career (Stebbins, 1982) .

In terms of career volunteering, several issues are worth noting on studying the data. First is that two of the participants volunteered within similar areas to their usual line of paid work, one in the Press Team and another in physiotherapy. Two other participants used skills they had built as volunteers in their pre-Games lives: one had extensive experience of volunteering as a cycling road race marshal, a role she also took in the Olympics; while another’s experience of volunteer football refereeing was useful background for his role in referee liaison at the Olympics.

Second, in terms of consistent and regular volunteering, 12 of the 20 diarists were regular volunteers in their lives outside the Games, with several of these volunteering every week.

Almost all of the Games Makers, including those who had not volunteered before, mentioned that they would like to continue volunteering after the Games, either for another mega-event, or for something else, as P1 highlights:

P1: A lot of us feel we would like to do something like this again. Several are looking at the Commonwealth games and another is looking at learning Portuguese in order to go to Rio 2016. Personally I am looking at the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi and am likely to be applying for them soon.

Third, if the term ‘moral career’ is used to describe the orientation of career volunteering, quotes such as P3’s assertion that experiences and feelings can be more important in life than financial remuneration is a good illustration of a Games Maker’s career volunteering.

P3: I feel that there are a lot more things in life, experiences, privileges and feelings that can replace financial rewards and that there are certain events that happen, such as the Olympics, where the experiences you can gain there outweigh the need to be financially remunerated.

### ***Knowledge, skills and training***

The third quality of serious leisure, according to Stebbins, is that special knowledge, training or skill is needed by the volunteer, so that significant persistent personal effort may be applied.

As pointed out in the above section on career volunteering, several of the participants drew on knowledge and skills which they had already gained in other areas of their lives. The quality of perseverance also highlighted that much of the pre-event nerves and anxiety was connected with the need to learn new knowledge or skills or getting used to a new environment. The complexity of the skills needed varied with the Games Maker roles, although even ticket scanning and giving out directions and information took some getting used to, as P12 wrote after her first day.

There was mention of the skills which Games Makers already possessed not being used to full advantage at times, such as one participant reporting that her fellow volunteer was not able to fully use his medical training, and P12’s entry that she was not being intellectually challenged.

All of the volunteers were invited to attend at least two training sessions before the Games, one relating to learning about the role, and the other to familiarise themselves with the venue where they would be working. They were also supplied with an A4 manual and access to on-

line training videos. Specific roles, such as team leadership, which required extra training; or involvement in one of the opening or closing ceremonies, which required extensive rehearsals, also suggest that extra knowledge was being gained.

P1 describes his venue-specific training session, which gave out facts, featured high-ranking officials, and stressed the importance of his role, while another thought that the role-specific training helped her to understand what she would have to do. However, there were also complaints from the diarists that the training sometimes lacked depth and thoroughness.

P13: It seems to me that often organisers/leaders don't understand that volunteers would like to know more about what they are doing and why; so in future I will expect less information to be given automatically but will ask more questions.

Two of the participants wrote of planning to get the qualification offered to Games Makers, also hinting that being a volunteer is perhaps higher on the self-actualization ladder than being paid to do a similar role. The keenness of P1 to gain a qualification also ties in with a career volunteering orientation:

P1: Today I have also been working through the online section of a hospitality qualification all Games Makers seem to be able to get out of this. It's an actual qualification as well as simply the experience to put on a CV. These make volunteering seem much more worthwhile than simply getting a job in London during the Olympics.

In line with serious leisure qualities, therefore, gaining knowledge and skills through training was accepted as important within the context of London 2012 volunteer training, even for what might be perceived as low-level tasks, skills and knowledge.

### ***Durable benefits***

The attainment of eight durable benefits forms the fourth quality of serious leisure. These may be divided into those which relate to self-interestedness, including self-enrichment,

recreation or renewal of self, feelings of accomplishment, and enhancement of self-image; and those relating to altruism, such as unselfish regard for others and making a contribution to group accomplishment (Stebbins, 1982). Stebbins also subsequently identified a ninth benefit: self-gratification or pure fun, which he regarded as likely to be shared by both serious and unserious leisure participants. Later work by Stebbins also sees the addition of two more social rewards: group accomplishment in completing a project, and contribution to the maintenance and development of the group (Stebbins, 2007).

Several of the participants, such as P6, wrote of giving up time to contribute to the Games:

P6: I never thought about ‘giving up my summer’ to be a Games Maker. I had chosen to apply more than two years ago, been prepared to save up my annual leave and forego a family holiday in order to play my part in making the Games happen.

Appreciation for the London 2012 volunteers was voiced repeatedly during the Games by Olympic officials, politicians and royalty, as well as by the media and the general public. These accolades gave many of the volunteers a feeling of accomplishment and pride in their contribution.

P4: Letter from PM, 10 Downing Street - A personal thank you for the part I played in making London 2012 Olympics such a huge success. What a wonderful feeling it was to receive this letter, and such a surprise too. A nice touch!

P12 commented that the accolades sometimes felt a bit over-the-top, however: “I felt guilty as I didn’t think I’d done much”, and P2 would also have liked more tangible appreciation to have been shown during shift time.

P2: I left still feeling a bit annoyed with the lack of recognition of our work by our team leader. In my day job my work is valued and I’m not sure my work in my Games Maker role really was.



Treats, such as being offered spare seats at events, or little gifts were appreciated and did not need to be costly to be seen as a benefit.

P1: Yesterday was our last shift and we all got given Games Maker relay batons as a gift. Along with the pin badges and a few other things I think this was a really nice touch. It's something to remember what we did and I think it's a brilliant idea.

Self-gratification seemed to be a key feature of volunteering at the Games: the chance to occasionally enjoy the sport or the other facilities, to see and meet famous athletes, or just the appreciation of being on site at the Olympic Park, were 'perks' mentioned by several participants:

P15: We had been told earlier that Game Makers were being allowed up The Orbit and I decided I would try and see if I could go up. I joined a queue of about 60 Games Makers and when all the spectators had been up we were told we could.

Comments about having fun as a volunteer were sparse, although P9 writes of creating an antidote to boredom, and P7 of posing for photographs:

P9: We were quite good at making the day go with a bit more fun as doing Mexican waves or high fiving the spectators on the way out which I found really uplifting.

P7: I also had two photos taken with complete strangers, which was fun, if a little weird!

The social reward of combining having fun with being part of a group was implied by P18, who also highlighted the enhancement to her self-image:

P18: Each day I met more Games Makers, it was so much fun, during our breaks we would meet for lunch, hang out, discuss our days and any interesting stories that happened, my friends and family were jealous wishing they had volunteered.

The diary evidence again confirms that the serious leisure qualities of durable benefits of all types were gained by the London 2012 volunteers.

### ***Belonging to a social world***

The fifth serious leisure quality is the tendency for the development of subcultures with a unique ethos of beliefs, values, norms, moral principles, and performance standards: that is a social world where actors and events coalesce.

The volunteers' uniform seems to have been a key unifying force, being used to signal their role to others and as a route to social interaction through being able to easily identify fellow volunteers.

P2: It made me realise how many other Games Maker people there are going to be. Seeing the person in Waterloo and then a couple of others on the train made me feel part of a real community. I wanted to smile at them so they knew I was one of them, but that will have to wait until I'm in my uniform too.

A craze for knitted mascots was begun by a Facebook group run by some of the volunteers, which also acted as a contact point for helping fellow volunteers to find accommodation and meet each other socially. Although many volunteers, such as P5 appear to have found it a useful group, P9 was less enthusiastic.

P5: This lady and [Facebook] page changed my experience from being a lone person to being part of a group of people to chat too, half of whom I have never even met but it's like I've known them all my life.

P9: I've also been hearing about a separate Games Maker group which seem to be a bit of a Games Maker cult and I've really only heard negative things about them. They make dolls and have made badges, are cliquey and hold raffles amongst each other, on their Facebook page they have the words, "the greatest games makers in

the world”, which I don’t think fits in with the ethos or mind set a Games Maker should have.

There is therefore evidence that the volunteers as a whole group formed a subculture, and that within this subculture, further social worlds developed.

### ***Identification with the pursuit, showing pride and excitement***

As a sixth quality of serious leisure, according to Stebbins (1982), participants tend to identify strongly with their pursuit and to present themselves as associated with the activity, speaking proudly, excitedly and frequently about it to other people.

Notable within the data was a sense of pride in being a Games Maker and a very marked sense of pride in Britain. This was mentioned by P16, for example.

P16: Made me feel incredibly proud to be British! Seb Coe’s speech was incredible and when they thanked the Games Makers our room cheered! I felt quite emotional watching it all. The Olympics symbolises a lot for me.

P1 writes of telling people beforehand about his Olympic volunteering role, while another links pride to presenting herself to the public in her Games Maker uniform.

P1: Everyone has been asking for the past couple of weeks what my plans for the summer are and has been with great pride that I have been able to say I am working at the Olympics. Everyone seems incredibly impressed.

The serious leisure quality of pride and excitement was therefore in evidence within the data.

### **Analysis: did the London 2012 volunteers experience serious leisure?**

As illustrated above, it is possible to find evidence of each of the six serious leisure qualities within the London 2012 volunteer data, although the degree of fit varies across the qualities. The various aspects of the quality of perseverance fit well, with all of the participants mentioning the challenges of London 2012 volunteering. Issues of persistence despite high

costs and boredom, and of overcoming nerves and tiredness were particularly prevalent, suggesting that the serious leisure framework fits well in this respect. However, it should be remembered that the diary writers, through their completion and submission of the diaries, may have a general tendency towards perseverance. Eight other recruited diarists did not submit any diary entries, nor did most of these reply to requests for explanations as to why not.

The serious leisure quality of career volunteering deserves special attention within this analysis. Volunteering at the 2012 Games, is, by its very nature, for a finite period. At first glance, if Stebbins' early interpretation of the term 'career' as the equivalent to continuous paid work is used, it could perhaps be concluded that it would be difficult for this quality of serious leisure to be identified within this body of data. It could be, instead, that 2012 Games volunteering is more akin to Stebbins' project-based leisure, or to episodic volunteering. However, if the development of the term as denoting a 'moral career', as suggested by Stebbins, is used, there seems perhaps to be more likelihood of this being applicable to the London volunteers. There were numerous examples of dedication and commitment to the Olympic volunteering cause, as well as mention of the experience carrying over into ethical and principled attitudes to life. It should also be noted that the moral career angle requires similar evidence to elements such as self-actualization, within the durable benefits quality. Examples were found of participants who Stebbins might have identified under his original definition of 'career volunteers'. For several, the activities involved in their London 2012 volunteering roles echoed those in volunteering and paid roles of which they already had extensive experience. For others, they had volunteered in roles related to their existing experience, or planned to continue to volunteer at future mega-events. The participants demonstrate that volunteering can go beyond its treatment as an alternative to the traditional concept of a career. As well as being an extension of people's experience in other areas of

their lives, a career in volunteering may be more like a series of assignments which together make a whole career, in much the same way that people may transfer from job to job during a paid career, or work in a freelance capacity. It should also be remembered, as pointed out earlier, that the commitment to being a volunteer at the London 2012 Olympics or Paralympics extended over a much longer period than just that of the event itself, tying in with Omoto and Snyder's (2002). Again, this suggests that labelling mega-event volunteering as 'project-based leisure' is perhaps not appropriate.

Although all of the participants mentioned the need for skills and training in relation to their roles, many were disappointed by the low levels of knowledge and lack of challenge involved in their volunteering roles. So, although there is some fit to this quality of serious leisure, particularly for those leadership and specialised roles which necessitated fairly extensive training, it is not perhaps as good a fit as for other qualities.

Under the durable benefits heading, Stebbins suggests that self-interestedness is more important than altruism as a motivator for volunteering. The data from this study confirms that it was overwhelmingly more important to the London 2012 volunteers, with mention of gains to the self being more prevalent than interest in selflessly giving to others. However, altruism was not completely absent.

There is some evidence of the London 2012 volunteers feeling a sense of belonging to a unique social world, reinforced by wearing the Games Maker uniform and working in groups, thus fulfilling another of the qualities of serious leisure. There are hints, however, that social groups may turn into exclusive cliques, thus having a potentially negative character.

Identification with the event and a need to talk with pride and excitement of the experience was another serious leisure quality which was strongly reflected in the London 2012 volunteers' diaries. An emotional pride in being part of an event which showed off Britain was particularly noticeable.

## **Refining the theoretical framework**

The six qualities which form the serious leisure theory were generally unproblematic in relation to the London 2012 volunteer experience data. Several observations and suggestions for refinement of the serious leisure perspective in relation to sporting mega-event volunteering may be made, however.

It seems that ‘career volunteering’, when related to sporting mega-event volunteering, is an even more complex term than Stebbins had envisaged. It is suggested here that the career volunteering quality of serious leisure should be modified to acknowledge that many volunteers are serial volunteers, although not necessarily in the same role each time. So it should be accepted that careers are not necessarily traditional cradle to grave but may be episodic (Sennett, 1998) in much the same way as sporting mega-event volunteers may jump from one assignment to the next. They could therefore be said to be career volunteers in that sense, particularly when re-using skill sets gained from other volunteering duties or from paid work. Goffman’s definition of ‘moral career’, which emphasises self-identity and status within a social system, was cited by Stebbins as an alternative way of viewing career volunteering. However, if the definition of career volunteering as outlined above is accepted, this viewpoint is not needed within the context of this quality. Goffman’s conceptualisations could be better placed as further explanation of the durable benefits, pride in an event, and belonging to a social world qualities, however.

There also seems to be no need to utilise the ‘project-based leisure’ category in connection with Olympic and Paralympic volunteering, despite Stebbins’ suggestion of its potential application to the Calgary Winter Olympics. As has been shown by these data, although at first glance it seems that Olympic volunteering is a short-term, one-off ‘project’, the evidence suggests that it is not: the run-up to the event is long and anxious for volunteers, the memories and reflections are enduring, and many are then keen to repeat the experience at

subsequent Olympics or other sporting mega-events too. Other studies appear to confirm this finding of sporting mega-event volunteers being keen to continue their volunteering career within this context. This puts it more suitably in the career volunteering category of serious leisure, particularly if it is understood, as suggested above, that careers may be episodic in nature but linked by the use of similar skills.

The framework should also provide more acknowledgement that volunteering is not always a positive experience. The quality of perseverance does hint at this. Other serious leisure qualities may also have downsides, as suggested by Rojek (2000), a factor which could be built into the framework. For example, it could be acknowledged that the establishment of a volunteer-based social world can also result in cliques and exclusion; while training and allocated tasks may not always challenge sufficiently.

### **Limitations**

The use of diaries as research material is not without its limitations, as Latham (2014) highlights. They make high demands on both the researcher, due to the high volume of output, and on the research participants' time during what would have already been an intensive volunteering period. The diaries may not necessarily be completed in line with the project brief: not all of the diarists for this project demonstrated that they had used the reflective framework they were given, and some did not write their entries in a regular ongoing manner. Due to a need to avoid potential security breaches during the London 2012 Games, it was decided not to collect the diary entries as they were written, so there was no possibility of checking conformity, or providing diary writers with ongoing support, until after the event. No guidance on the topics to be covered was given beforehand, beyond to write about and reflect on 'what happened', so theory has been applied after data collection, with no possibility of directing the content towards ensuring coverage of the qualities of serious leisure for example.

Latham also points out that diary writing requires basic skills, including an ability to write, to self-organise, and to keep track of time. One diarist who withdrew after initially agreeing to participate, contacted the researcher and admitted that he had tried to write an entry but just did not feel that he had the writing skills. The depth and quality of the diary entries was also variable, ranging from well observed and self-interrogated reporting, to short factual statements. There may also be a tendency for diarists to emphasise the positive over the negative, particularly when it is known that they will be read and reported on, although this did not seem to be the case for this study's participants.

Potential improvements for the future use of the method may perhaps be to encourage participants who are daunted by typing up diary entries to handwrite them instead (which one participant actually did), or to record spoken diary entries on a mobile phone voice app or similar. Shorter, and therefore perhaps less daunting entries, could be encouraged by the use of mobile phone or tablet-based templates which could be more easily completed by the diarist in the field. During a less security conscious event, the researcher may be more able to be proactive in offering support and encouragement during the diary writing period.

Although a higher number of diaries may have been desirable to increase validity, the twenty diaries collected did produce an overall total of 334 diary entries of varying length. Analysis of the entries produced enough corroborating evidence relating to serious leisure to suggest that saturation had been reached with this number of participants.

### **Final conclusions and suggestions for further research**

This paper therefore concludes that the volunteers' lived experience of the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games can be seen as serious leisure. It is also concluded that this is a useful framework for the examination of sporting mega-event volunteering, as well as a way of providing insights for volunteer managers.



Several developments to the theory would enable a still better fit to be made to Olympic and other sporting mega-event volunteering, however. In particular, further work is needed to confirm that the suggested adjustment to the definition of the term career volunteering is appropriate in relation to events. It also seems that project-based leisure is not needed as a third dimension of the leisure framework in relation to sporting mega-event volunteering, particularly if again there is an understanding that career volunteering entails linked volunteering assignments.

Despite the limitations highlighted above, the diary method has given in-depth insight into the lived experiences of London 2012 volunteers. With 70,000 volunteers due to assist at the Rio 2016 Olympic Games, plus the presence of volunteers at many other sporting mega-events taking place across the world, there is much potential to study volunteers' lived experiences using this method. Of particular interest would be the examination of the experiences of a range of different nationalities volunteering at Rio, while a specific study of the British volunteers at Rio would enable a comparison to be made with this study of British volunteers in their home country. Serious leisure had provided a useful analysis framework for this case study, while the findings have enabled suggestions to be made for refinement. Future work on serious leisure within other Olympic Games volunteering contexts, as well as within the context of volunteering at other mega-events, and within the wider event context, is recommended in order to enable further discussions to take place.

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